

2016

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Recommended Citation

Yenney, Caolfionn B. and Sacco, Janie II (2016) "Delivering Disability Accommodations at a Community College: A Case Study," *College Student Affairs Leadership*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/csal/vol3/iss1/5>

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Delivering Disability Accommodations at a Community College: A Case Study

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This case study explores the Office of Disability Support Services (DSS) at Northern Midwestern Community College (NMCC). Like many state institutions of higher education, NMCC has undergone continued budgetary cuts, some of which have impacted their services. Additionally, NMCC faces limited support from administration and resistance from instructors to provide accommodations. Taking the position of the accommodations coordinator, this case study challenges readers to consider a student concern from an institutional, collaborative, student response, and strategic perspective.

Keywords: Community colleges, disability accommodations, disability support services

Contextualizing the Case

As a required department at institutions of higher education, disability support services (DSS) offices work to address issues of accessibility, which students with disabilities face. An increase in the number of students seeking services has created significant staffing and budgetary challenges for these offices in providing appropriate accommodations. According to the US Department of Education, about 11% of college students identify as having a disability with 42% of those having a disability identifying as people of color and 56.3% of those having a disability identifying as women (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015).

Adding to the high demand DSS offices face, many policies regarding accommodations are relatively new to higher education and a significant number of students with disabilities enroll at two-year institutions. The Americans with Disabilities Act was implemented only twenty-six years ago, with updates occurring in 2008 (ADA Amendments Act) and 2011 (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) (United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). A recent study conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) showed that 45% of undergraduate students with disabilities enrolled in two-year public institutions (NCES, 2015). In order to understand the experience of students with disabilities, the AACC conducted a survey in 2006 and determined trends regarding staffing and types of disabilities present. Specifically, the survey found that while an average of three out of four respondents indicated there was a dedicated office for DSS, the remaining respondents did not have more than two full-time staff at their institution dedicated to

serving students with disabilities (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2016). Considering community colleges serve almost half of the undergraduate population of students with disabilities, this level of staffing is alarming. Additionally, the lack of research from an academic perspective is also concerning as there is scant research on the intersections of disability support services, community colleges, and institutional support. Limited research has been published on issues such as barriers to student use of DSS offices, instructor perceptions of communication between DSS offices and students, and the experiences of students with learning disabilities in college (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010; Szymanski, Hewitt, Watson, & Swett, 1999). Further research is needed to determine the issues these offices face including adequate staffing, faculty perceptions, institutional backing, budgeting, as well as sustainable solutions.

Oertle and Bragg (2014) note that students with disabilities will attend community colleges rather than four-year higher education institutions due to student support services, specialized programming, course accessibility, and convenience. In order to meet the needs of students with disabilities, Oertle and Bragg (2014) propose that DSS programs implement a Transition to Community College framework, which incorporates policies such as person-centered access and accommodations, universally designed instruction in courses, routine evaluation of technology, and developing outcomes for students. When these components are in place, the community college setting can be a developmental place for students with disabilities. Without this framework, students with disabilities at community colleges may feel unsupported and find it difficult to achieve their academic goals.

Overview of Institution

Northern Midwestern Community College (NMCC) is a diverse college of approximately 8,000 students located in Mississippi Center, a first-ring suburb of a major Midwestern city. NMCC reflects the diversity of the community at large in Mississippi Center. Sixty-five percent of students at NMCC are students of color, 30% of which come from immigrant families. NMCC primarily serves first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds as 80% of students are Pell eligible. Currently, 12% of students are registered with NMCC's Office of Disability Support Services and based on data from the past ten years, the college predicts that the population of registered students will increase to 15%. As a state college, North Midwestern Community College has faced many budgetary challenges in the past several years, which drastically limited services available to students.

Current Problem

NMCC has three staff members in their Office of Disability Support Services (DSS). There is a director of DSS who issues accommodations; a coordinator of DSS who organizes testing, note taking, and assistive technology programs; and an office manager who runs the daily operations of the office as well as supports the accommodations coordinator as necessary. Due to the administration's strict policy on documentation, the director of DSS is the only person who is able to issue

accommodations. These accommodation requests cover a broad spectrum including providing quiet spaces to take exams, increased exam time limits, assistance with note-taking in class, and increased passing time between classes. Students must make appointments in advance and sometimes wait up to three weeks to be seen by the director of DSS. If they do not have their appropriate documentation during their first appointment, they must reschedule. On average, it takes students about six weeks to receive their accommodation letter. Once students receive their accommodation letter, they often receive pushback from faculty. Some faculty members view accommodations as cheating or as giving students an unfair advantage. Faculty members will often forget to provide tests to the testing center coordinator and students do not often participate in the note-taking program as the note taker pool is often small. The director of DSS is frustrated with the process as it exists, but is under strict orders from the dean of Student Affairs regarding documentation. The director has asked multiple times if her accommodations coordinator can help with approving accommodations, which would cut the time for processing in half, but the dean refuses, saying that he only trusts her.

The coordinator of DDS is sitting in their office when Kadara, a student whom the coordinator knows well, comes in very upset. She tells the coordinator that her professor forgot to bring her test to the testing center again, so she had to walk to class to pick up the examination. Her professor reluctantly gave her the exam and told her that if she really wanted to be successful she would learn to take her test with the rest of the class, despite the fact that Kadara has an approved accommodation to take her exams in a quiet area with no time restrictions. The DSS office still has not found a note taker for two of her four classes and she is getting behind. Kadara remarks to you, “Nobody cares about us. It’s like they don’t even want to give us accommodations, and when they do, it’s a gamble if they work. My friends and I are so tired of this and we’re thinking of starting a petition. Something has to change. What should I do?”

Key Stakeholders

Director of Disability Support Services: The director of Disability Support Services has worked at NMCC for 10 years. She is a strong advocate for students with disabilities but feels as though budgetary limitations and restrictions from leadership limit the level of service she can provide students--particularly in recent years.

Coordinator of Disability Support Services: The coordinator of Disability Support Services has been in this role for two years. The coordinator is often on the “front lines” of negotiating students’ accommodations with other offices, staff, and faculty across the college.

Dean of Student Affairs: The dean of Student Affairs at NMCC has been in this role for three years. Charged with leading several departments at the college, he focuses his time primarily on risk-prevention and student conduct. The dean does not have any prior experience working with Disability Support Services or providing accommodations to students.

Kadara, a student: Kadara is a first-year student at NMCC who is seeking accommodations in her classes including note-taking assistance, a quiet space for exams,

and no time restrictions on exams. She has been growing increasingly frustrated with the services provided by the Disability Support Services in recent months.

Tasks for the Reader

Imagine you are the coordinator of DDS and approach the following tasks:

1. How do you respond to Kadara's question?
2. How would you bring this student concern to the attention of your colleagues both within and outside of your office?
3. Provide three ways in which you would work with faculty and staff to help address Kadara's immediate concerns. What is your rationale for focusing on those methods?
4. How might you assess whether Kadara's concern is indicative of a larger campus climate issue?
5. In what ways could your team in DSS advocate for additional funding to support student accommodations?

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